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Commentary

The “Negro” Problem in the 1980s

by
Wornie L. Reed

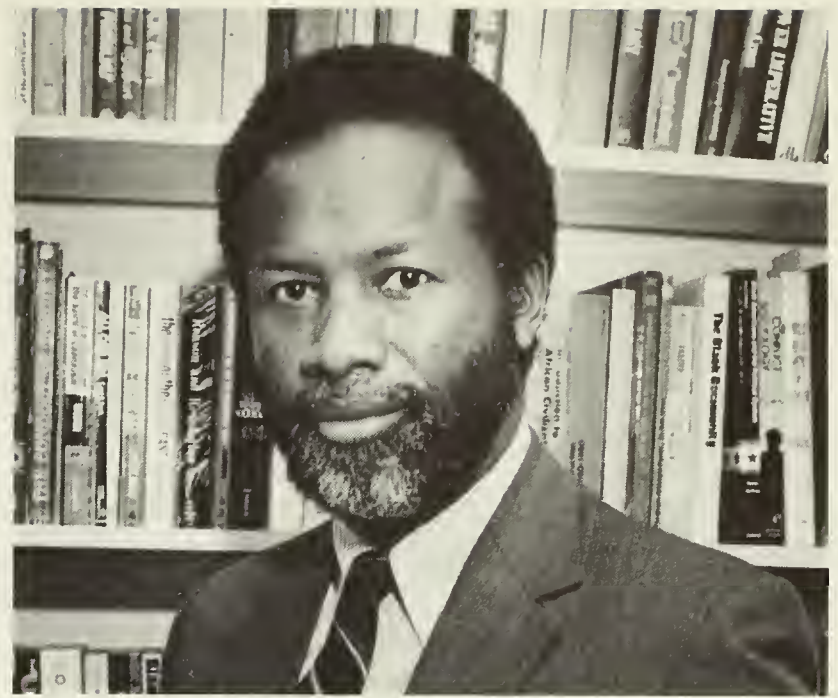
Since 1984 the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Science has been conducting a study on the status of black Americans. And since 1986 the William Monroe Trotter Institute has been conducting a similar study. The Trotter Institute study was developed because we wanted to have the widest possible discussion of the present condition of blacks and the social policy implications of that condition.

In the 1980s the black community is plagued by problems, among them unemployment, underemployment, poverty, crime, and poor health. The gap between blacks and whites in economic status is not closing. Consequently, there is a great need to examine trends, evaluate programs, and recommend social policies to address these problems. So, four years ago, with \$2 million in funding from foundations, the NRC began a study to report on the status of blacks from 1940 to the present and on the *future status of blacks in the United States*.

The NRC study, which is billed as an update of Gunnar Myrdal’s study, *An American Dilemma*, has faced severe criticisms. Many critics have complained about the limited involvement of black scholars in the conceptualization, planning, and development of the project. They note that many black scholars who are prominent in some of the areas under study have been conspicuously omitted from the study panels.

Since the NRC study is intended as an update of the Myrdal study, it might be useful to review the Myrdal work. Myrdal was recruited to direct that study from Sweden, a country with no history of colonialization and no apparent vested interest in the history of black-white relations. The work, which was published in 1944, reigned for nearly a quarter of a century as the authoritative study of black life in the United States. There was no competing major study.

In a masterfully crafted argument Myrdal concluded that the racial oppression of blacks in America was the result of an American conflict, an American dilemma: the discrepancy between an egalitarian ideology and racially discriminatory behavior. He addressed the real issue, racial oppres-



sion; however, he presented it in combination with a very positive statement about America, about the American Creed, thereby making his overall assessment of racial problems more palatable to his audience.

An American Dilemma became a classic within American social science, and it reached a broad readership. For two decades it was the definitive survey of black Americans. Civil rights activists, ministers, teachers, and social workers used the book as a reference in their struggles against segregation.

In spite of its widespread influence in the black community as well as in the Northern white community, the study had its black critics. Many questioned whether racism could be reduced by addressing the contradiction in Americans’ conscience. On the other hand, liberal social scientists were reluctant to criticize a book that forcefully condemned racism and spread this message to a wide audience.

Some social scientists argued that Myrdal paid too little attention to institutional racism, and that the elimination of racial discrimination and domination would require the addressing of social structural problems and institutional change. In a significant critique the novelist Ralph Ellison applauded the book but situated the Myrdal study in a historical line of social science writings that had done more to maintain the status quo for blacks than to change it. (See the related article by William Edwards in this issue.)

A Harvard professor proclaimed in the 1920s that social science was the means by which the United States would *save* itself from the various ethnic groups that were beginning to populate the country. By that he meant that the new science could be used to differentiate, evaluate, and *treat* these disparate persons. There have been a number of studies on blacks since then, with the Myrdal study being the most notable. However, there were also studies by

Moynihan (on the black family) and Coleman (on black education) that were less well received by the black community.

But the issue is not social science itself. Rather, it is the use to which it is put (i.e., what is the research question?). Increasingly, blacks are insisting on being more than just the objects of study. Black social scientists are insisting on being involved in studies on blacks and participating fully in the resulting social policy formulations. As a result of these concerns and considerations, the Trotter Institute study was initiated.

Critics of the NRC's study are concerned about the ramifications of a major study of black Americans in the current ideological climate. There has been a dismantling of the Great Society Programs and a cease-fire in the war on poverty. And some critics are concerned that a major study by a prestigious academic organization like the NRC might serve to validate current trends towards limiting the role of government in addressing the ills of society, especially those concerning race. Furthermore, these critics contend that the NRC study groups, while including a number of persons of integrity and commitment to principles of equality and fairness, are dominated by scholars who rule out both historical oppression of blacks and contemporary discrimination against blacks as major influences in the present condition of black communities.

Over 50 scholars have contributed to the Trotter Institute study. This multidisciplinary group of scholars includes persons from all sections of the country and from varied settings—private and public universities, major universities, historically black universities, and private agencies. Core participants in the study were organized into six study groups. Wornie Reed, Director of the Trotter Institute, is Executive Director of the study. James E. Blackwell,

Professor of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and Lucius J. Barker, Gellhorn Professor of Public Affairs and Professor of Political Science at Washington University, serve as Co-Chairs of the project. Tentatively, the findings are scheduled to be released late this year or early in 1989.

The names of the study groups and the study group leaders follow:

(1) **Education:** Charles V. Willie (Chair), School of Education, Harvard University, and Antoine Garibaldi (Vice-Chair), Department of Education, Xavier University (New Orleans); (2) **Employment, Income, and Occupations:** William A. Darity, Jr. (Chair), Department of Economics, University of North Carolina, and Barbara Jones (Vice-Chair), Department of Economics and Finance, Prairie View A&M University; (3) **Political Participation and the Administration of Justice:** Michael Preston (Chair), Department of Political Science, University of Southern California, and Diane Pinderhughes (Vice-Chair), Department of Political Science, University of Illinois; (4) **Social and Cultural Change and Continuity:** Alphonso Pinkney (Chair), Department of Sociology, Hunter College, and James Turner (Vice-Chair), Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University; (5) **Health Status and Demography:** William A. Darity, Sr. (Chair), School of Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Stanford Roman (Vice-Chair), Dean, Morehouse Medical College; (6) **The Family:** Robert Hill (Chair), Research Consultant, and Andrew Billingsley (Vice-Chair), Department of Family and Community Development, University of Maryland.

Wornie L. Reed, Ph.D., is Chairperson of the Department of Black Studies and Director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

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